

Message Text

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PAGE 01 TOKYO 00836 181047Z
ACTION OES-07

INFO OCT-01 EA-12 ISO-00 AID-05 CEQ-01 CIAE-00 SOE-02
COME-00 DODE-00 EB-08 EPA-04 INR-07 IO-14 L-03
NSF-02 NSC-05 NSAE-00 PM-05 USIA-15 SS-15 SP-02
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R 180859Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4431

UNCLAS TOKYO 0836

FOR OES/ENP/EN

DEPT PASS TO EPA, NOAA, CORPS OF ENGINEERS

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: SENV, JA
SUBJECT: MERCURY CONTAMINATION CLEAN-UP

1. IN OCTOBER 1977, THE GOJ ND KUMAMOTO PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENTS ANNOUNCED PLAN TO DREDGE PART OF BOTTOM OF MINAMATA BAY AND TO RECLAIM OTHER PARTS OF BAY TO REDUCE POTENTIAL FOR ABSORPTION INTO BIOSPHERE OF MERCURY CONTAMINATION FOUND IN BOTTOM SEDIMENTS. ONE AND A HALF MILLION SQUARE METER AREA CONTAINING MORE THAN 25 PPM MERCURY IN SEDIMENT WILL BE DREDGED. ANOTHER 580,000 SQUAAE METERS, EVEN MORE HEAVILY CONTAMINATED, WILL BE FILLED TO PROVIDE RECLAIMED LAND FOR RECREATIONAL AND INDUSTRIAL USE. PROJECT IS ESTIMATED TO REQUIRE 10 YEARS TO COMPLETE AND TO COST IN EXCESS OF 20 BILLION YEN. ABOUT 60 PER CENT OF COST IS TO BE BORNE BY CHISSO CORP., ILL-FATED CHEMICAL COMPANY WHICH HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS CULPRIT IN DISCHARGE OF WASTES AND WHICH NOW IS ON VERGE OF BANKRUPTCY DUE TO SUCCESSFUL LEGAL ACTIONS AGAINST IT BY VICTIMS OF WHAT IS NOW CALLED MINAMATA
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DISEASE (ENVIRONMENTAL MERCURY POISONING). REMAINDER OF COST WILL BE SHARED BY NATIONAL AND PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENTS.

2. WHEN PROJECT WAS FIRST ANNOUNCED, LOCAL RESIDENTS BEGAN TO EXPRESS FEAR THAT DISTURBANCE OF BOTTOM SEDIMENTS BY DREDGING AND FILLING OPERATIONS WOULD

REDISTRIBUTE MERCURY CONTAMINATION AND INCREASE POTENTIAL FOR MERCURY UPTAKE BY SEALIFE AND THENCE BY HUMANS. BY END OF JANUARY, LOCAL CONCERNS WERE CONSOLIDATED AND FORMALIZED IN LAWSUIT FILED IN KUMAMOTO DISTRICT COURT BY 1817 PLAINTIFFS FROM MINAMATA CITY AND ADJACENT COMMUNITIES. COMPLAINT ASKS FOR INJUNCTION AGAINST OPERATIONS IN BAY. LAWSUIT CAME AS SURPRISE TO PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENT, SINCE REMOVAL OF SEDIMENT HAD BEEN DEMANDED PREVIOUSLY BY VICTIMS OF MINAMATA DISEASE. SUIT CLAIMS THAT 25 PPM MAXIMUM TOLERABLE LIMIT SET BY AUTHORITIES IS TOO HIGH, THAT ENGINEERING METHOD TO BE USED WILL SPREAD CONTAMINATION, AND THAT INSUFFICIENT CARE WILL BE TAKEN TO PREVENT CONTAMINATED FISH FROM LEAVING AREA.

3. WHEN EMBASSY ASKED GOJ ENVIRONMENT AGENCY FOR ITS VIEW OF COURT ACTION, THE OFFICIALS CONCERNED WERE UNANIMOUS IN SUPPORT OF SAFETY OF THE CLEAN-UP WORK AND SAID THEY WERE CALLING FOR EARLY RESUMPTION OF WORK. THEY NOTED THAT THE KUMAMOTO PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN FORCED TO SUSPEND THE WORK UNDER PRESSURE OF LOCAL RESIDENTS.

4. IN INTERESTING SIDELIGHT TO ABOVE DEVELOPMENTS, MOVEMENT HAS BEGUN IN KUMAMOTO AREA TO RESCUE CHISSO CORP. FROM INSOLVENCY. COMPANY IS LARGEST SINGLE EMPLOYER IN AREA, AND ITS BANKRUPTCY WOULD HAVE MAJOR UNCLASSIFIED

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ADVERSE ECONOMIC IMPACT.
SHERMAN

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NNN

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